



## Pandemic Flu and Your Business

### A Planning Guide for Businesses and Organizations

#### What is pandemic flu?

**Pandemic flu** refers to any novel flu strain to which humans have little or no natural immunity that causes a widespread outbreak. It is a viral respiratory illness spread easily from person to person and can cause global infection and devastating fatality.

**Seasonal flu** is a viral respiratory illness to which humans have some immunity. A few strains of A type and B type influenza viruses pop up each year and a different vaccine is developed annually.

**Avian flu** or **bird flu** refers to type A influenza H5N1 which occurs naturally among birds. Humans have no immunity to this strain. Currently, it is only easily spread by bird-to-human contact. This strain has gotten so much attention because of its virulence in humans and the potential for viruses to mutate. Experts fear it could genetically mutate to spread easily among people, sparking a pandemic.

#### When will a pandemic hit?

It is unknown when the next influenza pandemic will occur. Its scope and magnitude is also impossible to predict. Pandemics have occurred in 1918, 1957 and 1968. Experts agree that the next pandemic is long overdue, but cannot predict when it will happen.

Experts are closely watching the spread of H5N1. If they observe that it has gone under a significant genetic mutation and is spreading easily among humans, a pandemic is likely. However, the avian flu H5N1 variant may not ever mutate. A different strain may emerge. This is simply another uncertainty about pandemic flu.

A pandemic will not be a sudden event. It will unfold over time. Public health officials will know if there is a novel, emerging flu strain that could cause widespread illness and will track it as it spreads.

#### What about vaccines and antivirals?

It is difficult to predict what type of flu virus will cause a pandemic. An effective vaccine for a pandemic flu strain cannot be developed until it has already emerged and is efficiently spreading among humans. The development of such a vaccine may take months and the supply may be limited, thus cannot be relied upon to effectively combat a pandemic.

Antivirals are prescription drugs that are used to treat seasonal influenza. They may prevent infection or lessen the duration of symptoms of someone already infected. Experts are not sure whether antiviral medications like *Tamiflu* and *Relenza* will work against a pandemic flu strain. While the federal government is stockpiling these drugs, their effectiveness is not certain and the supply may still be limited.

#### How Should I Prepare My Business?

Businesses have the responsibility to protect the health and safety of employees and a social duty to limit the negative impact on the economy and the community. The effects of a pandemic will be felt by the business itself, its employees, customers and other stakeholders. Planning is crucial in assuring the continuity of the business and addressing these issues.

It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the workforce could be absent in the event of a pandemic. Identifying critical operations and staff members are just some of the key components to preparedness.

Businesses are strongly encouraged to think about ways to limit interaction among employees and between employees and clients. Non-pharmaceutical interventions (i.e. social distancing, quarantine, isolation, hand hygiene, cough/sneeze etiquette) may be the best defense in stopping the spread of the flu and help businesses and communities stay afloat during a pandemic.

Ideally, planning for the impact of a pandemic will become part of an overall business continuity and contingency plan. The basic aspects to consider are:

- Impact on business itself
- Impact on employees
- Impact on customers or clients
- Policies to be implemented
- Allocating resources to protect employees and customers and assure continuity of operations
- Employee communication and education
- Coordination with external organizations

#### Top 10 Planning List for Businesses

1. Identify a Pandemic Influenza Coordinator (PIC) and assess need for pandemic influenza planning committee.
2. Evaluate and discuss potential impact on budget and financial operations.
3. Identify essential employees and job functions; critical assets, inputs, suppliers and vendors; important records; and prioritize critical services as:
  - High-must be performed in order to fulfill legal, safety/security or regulatory obligations.
  - Medium-may need to be performed in order to maintain a revenue stream or to support the high priority services.
  - Low-can be discontinued for a period of time (may need to define for each service) while recovering from prolonged staff absences.
4. Identify scenarios which may increase or decrease demand for your services.
5. Identify 24/7 contact(s) to activate Emergency Communications Plan (ECP)
6. Anticipate employee absences, identify chain of command and its back-ups, develop procedures for employee communication; review sick leave policy and its flexibility.
7. Identify "social distancing" guidelines to limit face-to-face contact among employees and between employees and clients
8. Assess ability and resources needed to use flexible work schedules and work hours (staggered shifts) and alternate worksites (home, telecommuting, etc.)
9. Identify authorities, triggers, and procedures for activating and terminating the department's pandemic response
10. Educate employees about: pandemic influenza fundamentals (signs, symptoms and modes of transmission); personal and family protection (hand hygiene, coughing/sneezing etiquette); and response strategies (social distancing; contingency plans; isolation and quarantine).

